

MMS Alaska OCS Region

Focus Sheet

Traditional Knowledge: Expanding Our Understanding of the Alaskan Arctic

What Is Traditional Knowledge?

According to the Native people of Alaska, Traditional Knowledge is practical understanding about the Alaskan physical environment and how best to interact with the land and its resources. Such knowledge is both enduring and dynamic, based on teachings passed down over generations, and on the more recent experiences of modern Alaska Natives as they interact with the natural environment.

Traditional Knowledge and the MMS Mandate

To manage offshore oil and gas resources on the Outer Continental Shelf requires the MMS to integrate many disciplines into our decision documents, such as environmental impact statements. Descriptions of the environment and assessments of natural, biological, and sociocultural resources are vital to sound decision making by MMS managers.

MMS addresses concerns about leasing and development activities in the Alaskan Arctic by assessing impacts to endangered and threatened species, bowhead whales, marine and coastal birds, marine mammals like seals, walrus, polar bears, and beluga whales, as well as Native subsistence harvest and the cultural activities of the Inupiat. Traditional Knowledge is extremely valuable in our understanding of these resources and concerns over development in the Arctic.

MMS consults with the State of Alaska, other Federal agencies, the North Slope Borough, the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, and the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, as well as Native tribal governments, traditional councils, and local citizens.

Beginnings

Beginning in 1995, MMS met with the newly formed Alaska Native Science Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to discuss approaches for using Traditional Knowledge in its decision-making processes. Later that year, local officials and village elders helped MMS identify expert Traditional Knowledge sources for potential consultation prior to EIS documentation. These included transcripts from North Slope Borough Elders Conferences and published interviews of Inupiat elders and other knowledgeable residents. MMS also had a ready source of more than 25 years of archived hearing transcripts and meeting notes from earlier lease sales that contained considerable Native observations. Collectively, these sources provided a rich preliminary source of Traditional Knowledge and were immediately considered for use in the EIS process.

Traditional Knowledge information is now routinely analyzed in conjunction with other information for use in MMS EIS documentation. Moreover, Alaska Native groups and institutions have the opportunity to review how such information is presented. The North Slope Borough Wildlife Management Department, the North Slope Borough Mayor's Office, and Traditional Knowledge experts identified by the mayors of local communities have reviewed MMS EIS text.

Benefits

Including Traditional Knowledge in MMS decision documents has had several positive effects. The process has led to unique and valuable dialogue between MMS and the people of the North Slope that continues today and will continue in the future. The process has also led to negotiations for resolving various important local issues and problems that Traditional Knowledge has brought to light. These

include added protection of subsistence whaling activities, increased scientific peer review of offshore oil industry monitoring plans, and the development of a conflict resolution process. A particularly important outcome of attention to Traditional Knowledge has been the sharing of formal scientific and Traditional Knowledge information in various venues, such as the 1995 Arctic Synthesis Meeting which enabled Inupiat whaling captains to share their extensive knowledge of the bowhead whale with MMS EIS analysts. Other meetings, such as an in-house workshop with Canadian anthropologist Dr. Ellen Bielawski, provided MMS staff with hands-on training on how to effectively incorporate Traditional Knowledge in its EA and EIS documentation.

Studies Expand the Knowledge Base

MMS has made the compilation of Traditional Knowledge an important objective of its Studies Program. For example, two ongoing studies involve documentation of Traditional Knowledge for use by both Federal and State agencies and others conducting research in the Alaskan Arctic.

The "Bowhead Whale Feeding Study" conducted in the eastern Beaufort Sea has incorporated Traditional Knowledge by enabling Inupiat whale hunters to contribute tradition-based understanding of bowhead whale feeding behavior into the study design, data collection, and analysis phases. The study "Collection of Traditional Knowledge of the Alaskan North Slope" being conducted by the Ukpiaqvik Inupiat Corporation in Barrow is designed to compile, categorize, and evaluate sources of Traditional Knowledge, for entry into an accessible and useful database. This is a particularly important study in that it is expected to develop a template for describing the often-rich social historical context of Traditional Knowledge, and for evaluating various information for its potential use as sources of Traditional Knowledge.

The Future

Government agencies including MMS will continue to maintain effective communication and consultation with Alaska Native groups. Attention to Traditional Knowledge in resource-related decisions will ensure Alaska Native history and ongoing experience with the natural environment is valued well into the future. After all, Alaska Native groups have succeeded for millennia on the challenging Alaskan landscape, and much may yet be learned from the teachings of the Elders and from the new experiences of Alaska's most enduring citizens. Indeed, effective use of Traditional Knowledge may well provide a vital link between lessons of the past and the appropriate manner for Alaskans to proceed into the 21st century.

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For More Information

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